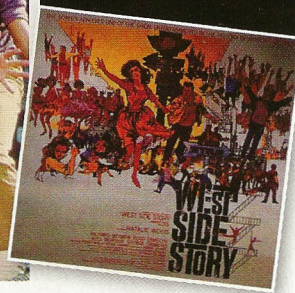
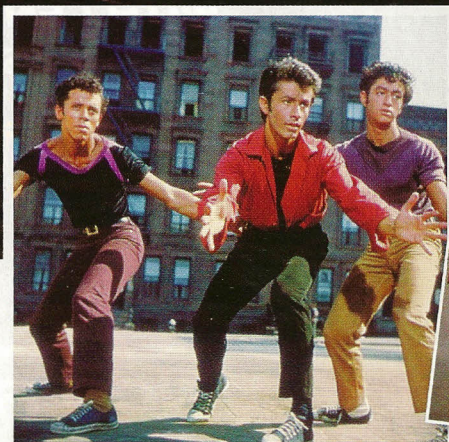




BOB J's CLASSIC CORNER

WEST SIDE STORY (1961)

- DIRECTED BY ROBERT WISE & JEROME ROBBINS



The origins of the most memorable musical of all time began with a phone call to Leonard Bernstein one January night in 1949. On the end of the line was dance choreographer Jerome Robbins with an idea for a modern musical based on *Romeo & Juliet*, that would be set amongst the communities of New York's Jews and Roman Catholics. The reason for the conflict between the two families (although not specified in Shakespeare's play) would be based on religion. Robbins even had a title for it – *East Side Story* – and he wanted Bernstein to write the music. But due to other projects already committed to by Bernstein, it would be another eight years before the show appeared on Broadway.

The final story written by author and scriptwriter

Arthur Laurents evolved from Robbins's original idea. Media headlines of racial gang problems

in 1950's Los Angeles influenced the trio to shift the location to New York's Upper West Side and drop the religious hook. The conflict would now be between rival inner city gangs, The Sharks (Puerto Rican) and The Jets (White European-American). Bernstein's brilliant music, incredible lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, and energetic choreography by Robbins resulted in a fabulous mix of romance, violence, singing and dancing that was part opera and part ballet. The show premiered

in Washington in 1957 and became a huge hit with audiences, notching up more than 700 performances on Broadway.

The enormous success of *West Side Story* attracted Hollywood, who were soon bidding for the film rights. It was finally secured by the Mirisch Corporation for \$375,000. Producer Walter Mirisch asked Jerome Robbins to be the choreographer for the production, but at first he refused unless he could direct the whole picture. Mirisch had no

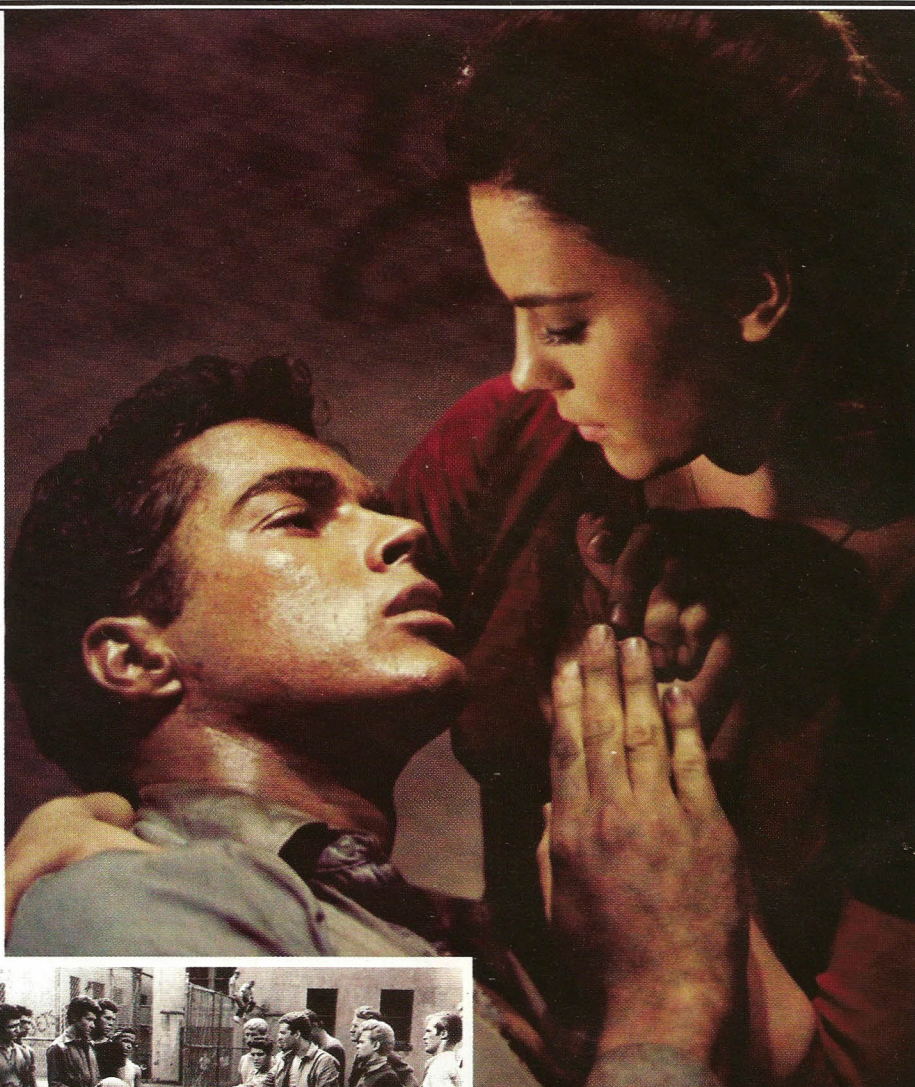
intention of handing over the full reins to a novice director and enlisted Robert Wise to handle the dramatic parts while Robbins directed the song and dance sequences. Robbins was a perfectionist and quickly went over budget with continual retakes of his dance scenes. After completing only four numbers he was unceremoniously fired from the project, leaving Wise in full directorial control.

When screen testing for the roles began in 1960 practically all of the original Broadway cast applied, only to result in most of them being rejected for appearing too old to play the teenaged characters on camera. An actor in the lead role for a musical but unable to sing had never bothered Hollywood. After all, they had been dubbing the singing voices of many of their stars for years. Subsequently, various non-singing actors and actresses were tested for the leading roles of the two star-crossed but doomed lovers. However, both director and producer wanted none other than Elvis Presley to play the lead role of Tony, and the singer gave the offer serious consideration. But once again, his incompetent manager persuaded him to turn down what might have been a perfect part for him. Presley stated many years later that he truly regretted his decision.

Surprisingly, the part went to Richard Beymer, who could neither sing nor act (in fact his film acting career more or less started and ended with this movie). Audrey Hepburn had been first choice for Maria but due to her pregnancy couldn't accept, leaving Natalie Wood (slightly miscast) to take the female star role. But it was the flashy second leads that provided the electric performances. Rita Moreno's smouldering Anita is a volatile mix of attitude and anger. George Chakiris, as her bold Shark leader lover and Maria's brother, brings ice cold menace to the role of Bernardo. And Russ Tamblyn, with his cocky charisma, showcased his considerable talents for the character of Riff – leader of the Jets and Tony's best friend.

The movie begins with a musical overture accompanied by abstract visuals of the Manhattan skyline, gradually zooming down to focus on a single basketball court and then a close-up of the slow snapping fingers of Riff and the Jets. The energetic dance routine that opens the prologue immediately illustrates for the audience the violence and intensity of life on the streets – from graceful balletic movements to sudden outbursts of dynamic acrobatics when the two gangs meet on the same turf.

The Jets are not motivated merely by youthful



aggression but see themselves as defending the honour of their community, and are irritated by the prospect of having to share their turf with these Latino newcomers. A decision is therefore made by Riff that the Jets will challenge the Sharks to a rumble at the dance that night in the local gym, to finally decide who gets control of the streets. Riff cajoles Tony (the previous leader of the Jets) to come to the dance, where he meets and falls in love with Maria. They dance with each other, oblivious to the mounting tensions between the gangs. At the rumble Tony refuses to fight Bernardo, but the whole confrontation quickly spirals

out of control when Riff is stabbed by Bernardo who is in turn killed by Tony. Only tragedy now remains for the lovers as Chino, Maria's pre-arranged Puerto Rican fiancé, hunts for Tony with a gun.

West Side Story ushered the movie musical into the modern era and set a new high standard. Sondheim's innovative lyrics explored themes of social and racial injustice which was still rife in the United States in the late 1950s. The song 'America' vividly portrays in words and music the hope of a new life in a new country but tempered by the racial discrimination suffered by many immigrants, poignantly defining the downside of the American dream as per the lines: "Life is all right in America."

Bob J.

• *West Side Story*
is now available
on Blu-ray